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ABSTRACT

Issues regarding the development of student's speaking skills and English as a second language (ESL) techniques designed to improve the teaching of conversation are described. Ten true and false assumptions about the teaching of conversation are considered: (1) everyone enjoys talking and participating in class discussion; (2) discussion topics in conversation classes are usually of great interest to students; (3) students will volunteer to participate in planned activities; (4) students who do well in structured situations will do well in class discussions; (5) in order to communicate, students need to use perfectly correct sentences; (6) memorizing dialogues and sentence patterns enhances communication; (7) error correction should be done immediately; (8) conversation classes are fun and easy to teach; (9) rigorous discipline is appropriate in a conversation class; and (10) foreign students will develop speaking skills naturally since they can practice outside of the classroom. Techniques for developing speaking skills and communicative competence are explored. It is emphasized that successful conversation classes require careful planning to keep motivation high and to challenge the students. (RW)

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LET'S TALK:

Developing Speaking Skills in the ESL Classroom

Paper presented at the Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Teaching Conference at the University of South Florida in June, 1983.

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Tampa, Florida, 1983

LET'S TALK

DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the issues involved in the development of our students' speaking skills and to provide some techniques to the ESL teachers to help them improve their teaching of conversation skills.

"Let's Talk" is a common request from ESL students, signaling, of course, their need for additional practice in the use of the language that they are learning. In other instances "Let's Talk" may mean "Talk to us; we want to hear what you have to say." In this case, ESL instructors sometimes do just that--talk to their students. While in this situation students may be gaining valuable information about the United States, its culture, or the teachers' personal views on different matters, the students are being deprived of the opportunity to use their English or to apply what they have learned in their other classes or through reading activities. The more opportunities for the students to speak in class, to interact with each other, to express their feelings or exchange their opinions and ideas, the more fluent and proficient they will become in English.

It is common to hear teachers invite students to participate in class discussions. However, have you noticed that such open invitation can bring silence to the classroom? Why? Part of the problem is that the question is too broad. The

more options available to the students the more difficult it is for them to narrow down the topic. What should I talk about? Can I say anything I want to say? How do I go about choosing an appropriate subject for class discussion? Will the other students like the topic as much as I do? ESL instructors need to be aware of the dangers of such open questions. There is a lot of planning that goes into making a conversation class a successful one; this planning has to keep in mind both the specific goals of the students in that class and their level of proficiency of the language.

Communication is the main goal in a conversation class. Students have to learn to listen to other speakers and learn to react to what they say. Conversation skills taught in the class should enable students to deal with native speakers of English in different circumstances by providing them with opportunities to establish contact with Americans. In other words, students should acquire communicative competence in addition to linguistic competence. Communicative competence, however, takes time to achieve because it involves both verbal and nonverbal communication. A systematic approach to the teaching of communicative competence is necessary. A key element in the acquisition of such competence is the context in which the conversation will take place.

To understand the complexity of the task of teaching conversation, I have chosen ten assumptions that merit discussion.

1. EVERYONE ENJOYS TALKING AND PARTICIPATING IN CLASS DISCUSSION-

This might be true in small groups among friends, but not necessarily in the classroom, and much less with an audience. This is not characteristic only of foreign students. According to The Book of Lists (1977), the fear of speaking is number one among all the other fears Americans have. This fear is greater for foreign students who have to deal not only with the message they want to convey but also with the appropriate and correct form of expressing it and making it clear to the other speakers. "What to say" and "How to say it" makes foreign students shy away from active participation in class discussions. Being the center of attention makes the students nervous; making mistakes and, therefore, losing face in front of their friends makes the situation even worse for many. Chastain (1971) has pointed out that "speaking to communicate begins when meaning and form are combined to express one's own ideas, not before." According to him, "Native speech combines a code and a message. The code is composed of sounds, the vocabulary, and the structures of the languages. These components, along with various kinesic elements, are organized into appropriate combinations in order to convey the speaker's ideas and opinions. The arrangement of the parts of the code into speech occurs at an unconscious and in an almost instantaneous manner. The objective, then, is to develop the students' ability to the point in which

they can concentrate on the message rather than the code." Part of the difficulty in the acquisition and development of speaking skills has been expressed by Jakobovits in terms of the encoding process involved in the latter which requires synthesis rather than analysis (1968).

2. DISCUSSION TOPICS IN CONVERSATION CLASSES ARE USUALLY OF GREAT INTEREST TO STUDENTS -

The topics chosen in conversation classes are usually selected by the instructor, and they are not necessarily the themes in which most students are interested. Granted, it is difficult to please everyone in class, especially when the students come from different backgrounds, are of different ages, and have different needs and goals. It is important, however, for motivational purposes, to direct some of the activities in the class to the use of the English language in situations of general interest. If the topics are too narrow, most students will be discouraged and will avoid participating since they know they can't contribute much on that particular subject. On the other hand, if the topic is too broad, students will lack the focus to make the exchange of ideas worthwhile. When students talk about completely different aspects of the same topic, they run the risk of not communicating at all, and chaos will set in. Usually students will feel that they are involved in busy work and give up.

A suggestion to solve this problem is getting the students involved in planning the contents of the course. The first day of classes the students should receive a list of tentative topics for discussion during the semester and select those that they like the most. Students are free to add other topics to the initial list. All choices need to be justified as part of this process. The planning itself becomes an opportunity to exchange ideas, to know the students' preferences, and to see them interact in class. As a result, teachers will have an inventory of suitable topics with which to work in class. Furthermore, they will have given their students a sense of satisfaction for their involvement in the planning of the course. Increased motivation leads to increased participation, and this at the same time leads to more fluency in the use of the language.

Good topics for discussion should have the following characteristics:

a. familiar to the students. (Do the students know something about the subject?)

b. appropriate for the level of the students. (Is the topic too abstract? too difficult?)

c. relevant to the students. (Do the topics relate to what their interests are? Can they actually use the information in their jobs or daily activities?)

d. debatable. (Can different points of view be presented?)

e. culturally appropriate. (Will any of the topics offend any students?)

f. narrow enough. (Do they offer a limited number of aspects that merit discussion?)

3. ONCE A CONVERSATION TOPIC IS SELECTED, STUDENTS WILL VOLUNTEER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ACTIVITIES PLANNED FOR THAT DAY -

Volunteer participation is desirable and should be encouraged. Unfortunately, only the most self-confident students will do so, and in many cases, this will become a problem because those few students will monopolize the conversation. The teachers have the task of seeing to it that every student participates although this might be to a different degree. Students should be aware that their contributions to the class are important, and that that is the only way in which they will be able to improve their speaking skills. Asking students directly for their input is probably the best way to assure that everybody contributes to the task at hand. Knowing that participation is not only expected but also required will be an important adjustment for students to make since not many foreign students are used to being outspoken and direct. This is in itself a cultural adjustment, and it will take time to get every student to the point of feeling comfortable with his participation in class, but a positive environment will help him accomplish this.

4. STUDENTS WHO DO WELL IN STRUCTURED SITUATIONS SUCH AS ANSWERING QUESTIONS, RESPONDING TO TEACHERS' CUES AND DRILLS WILL DO EQUALLY WELL IN CLASS DISCUSSIONS, ROLE PLAYING OR OTHER TASK-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES -

Evidence seems to be overwhelmingly against this assumption. There is as little carry over from drills to free conversation as there is from understanding to speaking. The skills needed for the latter are more varied, complex, and different in nature. We need to go beyond language manipulation to achieve communication. For efficient communication speakers need to share the social meaning of the linguistic forms used and this social meaning, according to Paulston and Bruder (1976), varies from culture to culture. They provide the example of the teaching of Wh questions in which it is necessary to teach not just the syntactic arrangement of the questions but also the restrictions of use of those questions. For example, questions about how much a person makes, how much he has paid for his home or how much he has paid for the clothes he is wearing may be appropriate in other cultures but not in the United States. Vietnamese, for example, are used to asking such questions to show interest in the other person. This points out to the fact that appropriateness is seldom included in textbooks and, therefore, never taught in class in any systematic way.

Non-verbal behavior (gestures, proxemics) and register are equally important in effective communication. Students need to be aware of these aspects if they are to communicate with native speakers of English. Being able to switch codes from formal to informal use of the language

needs to be stressed also. Role playing can provide the format for this kind of practice.

Perhaps the biggest adjustment for foreign students is to move away from well delimited situations in the classroom to real communicative situations in the real world. In class, students expect certain types of questions, some directed conversation, and fairly controlled activities; they are not ready for the unexpected reaction. In real life, students do not know what the other speaker is going to say, or how he is going to respond. These circumstances force the students to react according to the needs of the moment. Barry Taylor (1983) has indicated the need for the development of a communicative methodology that "will need to provide learners with opportunities to engage in unrehearsed communication and thereby experience doubt and uncertainty, and learn to make appropriate content and linguistic choices accordingly." Larsen-Freeman (1980) has also emphasized this aspect of communicative competence. She indicates that second language learners must acquire at least three types of rules. First, students should know the structure of discourse units such as greetings and conversational openings. Second, students should learn their communicative function. Third, students need to acquire pragmatic competence, which she defines as the ability to produce discourse forms appropriate to the situation.

Bernard Spolky helps us understand the different aspects involved in an individual's communicating competence by providing the following description of it (1980):

1)	linguistic dimension:		lexicon, semantics, grammar, phonology
2)	channels: oral-aural,		speech writing, gesture
3)	code dimension:	a)	varieties available - languages, regional dialects, social dialects, styles, registers
		b)	control of code selection rules
4)	topic dimension:		what can be talked about
5)	setting dimension:		ability to function in various domains (home, school, work, community)

5. IN ORDER TO COMMUNICATE, STUDENTS NEED TO USE PERFECTLY CORRECT SENTENCES -

ESL teachers need to keep in mind that in normal conversation, even native speakers do not use perfectly constructed sentences. "Clearly linguistic competence is not all there is to successful communication. As we have seen, it is quite possible to produce a series of ungrammatical utterances that succeeds in letting someone know what is in our minds. The opposite of this is also true. It is possible to produce perfectly grammatical sentences, yet fail to communicate." (Campbell 1979)

A Spanish speaker may say "where you going?" in the course of a conversation and be understood perfectly well. This also applies to pronunciation. Perfect pronunciation

of all sounds is not essential for communication as proven by people who have distinctive accents but are able to interact and communicate with native speakers without any problems. Because of this, there is a need to establish realistic goals as to the desirable levels of performance in terms of accuracy , fluency, and appropriateness. In other words, we should evaluate total communicative proficiency not just linguistic proficiency. Jakobovits (1968) states that "the imposition of a requirement to utter exclusively well-formed sentences would seriously hinder the fluency of most native speakers. The logical implication of this observation would be that no language teacher should ever force his pupils to use only well-formed sentences in practice conversation whether it be in the classroom, laboratory or outside."

6. MEMORIZING DIALOGUES AND SENTENCE PATTERNS ENHANCES COMMUNICATION -

This is false. These two activities are not conducive to spontaneous interaction. Seldom do we find ourselves in the exact situation in which the phrases that we memorized are applicable. We do not talk exclusively in formulas, although some formulas are a part of the language the students are to learn. Language learners need to create new utterances to express different ideas at different times; otherwise, they have not mastered the rules that govern language. Finocchiaro and Buono (1973) state this idea well when they say that if students "are ever to

be able to produce new utterances in new situations, they must have a grasp of the underlying principles related to scunds, forms, arrangements, and functions of the language. It is the principle or "rule" which they must learn to transfer to the new situation; it is the principle or rule which they must be helped to internalize."

Recitation of dialogues, furthermore, puts a burden on those students who are not used to memorizing material but who can use English effectively and gives other students the wrong idea about how to learn a second or foreign language.

7. ERROR CORRECTION SHOULD BE DONE IMMEDIATELY -

While this is true in a question and answer situation or in substitution and transformation drills, which are mechanical in nature, immediate feedback can be counter-productive. It will interrupt the students' train of thought or concentration in the message they want to get across. In conversation classes more than in other situations we should encourage students to take risks and attempt to use the new language without worrying about making mistakes. "Nothing dampens enthusiasm and effort more than constant correction when students are trying to express ideas within the limitations of their newly acquired knowledge of the language. Teachers who are non-native speakers of the language know that they are

often fully conscious of a mistake they have just made, even mortified by it, but unable to take it back. We should be happy when our students have reached the same level of awareness of acceptable usage, since it means they are becoming autonomous learners as well as autonomous speakers." (Rivers 1978), Correction of errors should be done after the class discussion or activity planned for the class is over and then only regarding those aspects that seriously interfered with communication.

8. CONVERSATION CLASSES ARE FUN AND EASY TO TEACH -

Conversation classes are indeed fun because of the opportunities for interaction and exchange of ideas among students and between teachers and students. However, they are not easy to teach. Teachers have to have a clear idea of what their goals are for each session and have to get every student in class involved. Moreover, ESL teachers have to try to keep the energy and enthusiasm level high so that students learn through the experience. By the nature of the course itself, there are many things that can go wrong: a few outspoken students can take over the discussion, the teacher might inadvertently take over, the conversation might not get anywhere, and students might then get the feeling that they are going in circles wasting their time.

Conversation classes can only be as successful as the

teachers make them. The more planning on the part of the teachers, the better the results. Ensuring every student's participation is essential. The activities planned for the class should not require an unsurmountable amount of time and preparation because the activities and discussions are not the goals for the course but tools to achieve communicative competence. Furthermore, teachers should set up, with the students' help, rules for their interaction. Most important of all, teachers have to keep in mind at all times their students' goals.

9. TO ENSURE A SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATION CLASS, THE INSTRUCTOR SHOULD ALWAYS BE "IN CONTROL" -

This is not true if by the phrase "in control" we mean rigorous discipline with the focus on the teachers. To be in control can be a positive quality. Stevicks' distinction between teacher control and student initiative is relevant at this point. According to him (1980), the two basic elements of control are structuring classroom activities and providing feedback to students. Initiative, on the other hand, refers to "the decisions made about who says what to whom and when." A balance between these two aspects is necessary for successful language learning. Thus, noisy classrooms, full of activity and healthy interaction are desirable. Teachers should avoid the temptation to "exert control" in the traditional sense and should give the students the chance to use their new language.

10. FOREIGN STUDENTS WILL DEVELOP THEIR SPEAKING SKILLS NATURALLY SINCE THEY HAVE PLENTY OF OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE THEIR ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM -

This is partially true. Many foreign students socialize only with people who speak their native language. They do not make friends among native speakers of English easily, and therefore, for many of them the classroom provides the only opportunity they have to use English. An effective teacher, consequently, will maximize the opportunities for students to use the language they are learning, acquire fluency, and learn to respond to different situations appropriately. This applies to every level of language proficiency.

From the discussion above, it is possible to identify four variables which, to a higher or lesser degree, will affect the success of a conversation class: the student, the teacher, the materials, and the environment.

THE STUDENT - Foreign students need to overcome affective factors in order to develop their speaking skills. These factors include the fear of making mistakes and not being understood, and of losing face in front of their teachers and classmates. Douglas Brown (1981) identifies both self esteem and inhibition as components of a "language ego" that second language learners develop. How healthy that "ego" is will determine how well the students learn a second language.

Carlos Yorio (1976)points out three affective variables that affect the students' performance in the development of their speaking skills. The first is anxiety: students need to feel comfortable in order to perform at their best. The second is self consciousness: students feel embarrassed at being corrected when they make mistakes. The third is ego permeability, also called challenge level by Robinett (1978): students should perform at their capacity level.

THE TEACHER - In a conversation class it is essential that teachers reduce their talking time and work at increasing that of their students. The one way to achieve this is by having students engage in student-to-student interaction and group work. (Mockridge- Fong 1979). Increasing the "individual pupil talking time," (West 1968) can only be achieved if the teacher plans each class in detail and uses a variety of techniques to enhance their students' learning and participation. ESL teachers in these classes are facilitators for interaction rather than teachers of grammar in a regular set up. This new role in a different type of class requires clear objectives, self assurance, and careful preparation.

THE ENVIRONMENT - Conversation classes cannot be successful unless there is a supportive and friendly atmosphere in which both students and teachers can feel comfortable. Students should feel free to move around when working in groups and should feel free to consult with the instructors if they have any questions.

Arranging the desks to form a circle seems to encourage students to talk to each other. Furthermore, this way every student is forced to participate in whatever activity is taking place at the time.

THE TOPICS - A key for student participation in class is motivation. The topics selected for class discussions or any other activity planned for that particular class have to be relevant to the students' experience and needs and should be familiar enough so that everyone in class can contribute to the task at hand. No matter how interesting the topic, if students lack pragmatic knowledge about it, there is not much that they can say about it. Students' input in the selection of topics, as suggested before in this paper, can assure personal involvement and participation in class.

TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS -There are numerous techniques that ESL instructors can use to help their students improve their speaking skills. Some of them deal with drills to practice a specific structure being taught in class: commands for giving directions, verbs in the past tense to narrate events that have taken place, etc. These techniques deal with the acquisition of linguistic rather than communicative competence (Paulston & Bruder 1976). In this paper the emphasis is on communicative competence since it involves real communication in which students can express their feelings, opinions, and thoughts without the traditional frame of the question and answer drill. For activities to be communicative, they have

to create an urgency to communicate something, to solve a problem, or to arrive at a consensus. Creative use of these techniques will help the teachers help their students achieve communicative competence.

The list of activities here is not exhaustive by any means. It is based on Paulston and Bruder's basic classification of communicative activities (1976), expanded to include other techniques found in the literature that can be of help to ESL instructors.

Communicative activities involve the learning and appropraite use of social formulas, the discussion of dialogues, the participation in problem solving activities, the interaction with native speakers of English in community oriented tasks, and the involvement in role playing. Each of these areas deserves special attention and is necessary to help students achieve fluency in English.

A. Social formulas - There are certain phrases that are part of every day experience such as greetings, introductions, apologies, congratulations, compliments, etc. These have to be taught and practiced in various situations until students feel at ease using them. Teaching some of these formulas include nonverbal communication as well: who is introduced to whom, what should be said according to the specific situation in terms of formality or informality, what gestures accompany some of those introductions: smile? hand shaking? eye contact?

Students need to learn how to apologize. When to do it and how to do it are important aspects to consider. In different cultures students might be expected to apologize profusely for a mistake made, but this kind of behavior is not expected in English. Various situations where apologies are required should be discussed. Moreover, films where some of these situations come up can clarify the concepts and the nonverbal communication involved.

A very important aspect connected to the social formulas students need to learn in a foreign language stems from the fact that native speakers of English have certain expectations as to the other persons' responses, which when not appropriate will be the cause of misinterpretation. For example, students need to learn how to interrupt, and most importantly, when to interrupt. Students who do not do this correctly can be considered rude and may not even realize what they did wrong because they were confident they were functioning correctly according to their rules of courtesy in their own culture.

Also, students need to learn to refuse invitations and to say "no" when needed, without antagonizing people or losing friends. Vietnamese students, for example, will say "yes" even though they mean "no" because they do not want to hurt the other person's feelings. By providing the students with social formulas appropriate

to these circumstances and information about the expectations native speakers have, teachers can help students deal with those situations.

B. Dialogues - Dialogues exemplify a short exchange between two or more people in real life situations. They become good examples about the natural progression of a conversation, the flow of arguments and ideas, and the expressions used both in formal and informal circumstances. As such, dialogues can be good points of departure for class discussion and provide an opportunity for students to engage in discussion while preparing dialogues of their own, which they will act out in class later.

Dialogues were extremely popular during the oral-aural approach to the teaching of English. Each lesson seemed to include a dialogue which students were asked to memorize and repeat in front of the class. This kind of activity was based on the assumption that learning a language was establishing a habit and that by memorizing dialogues, students would be able to use them outside the classroom. This practice became a burden to many students who found themselves memorizing conversations about situations that were not related to their needs and interests. Seldom did any students who memorized those dialogues find themselves using the phrases they had learned for the simple reason that the situations

were never exactly the same and the clues provided in the dialogues were never given in the same way by different native speakers of English. People do not talk and communicate exclusively in formulas; the creative use of language is the goal in the learning of a second language. This can only be accomplished by exposing students to spontaneous speech and encouraging them to express their feelings and thoughts in different ways to different people.

Through the use of dialogues students learn to keep up a conversation, change the topic if they want to, and learn to make small talk after being introduced to people, for example. Foreign students frequently complain about people not talking to them enough and mistake this for unfriendliness. Students answer questions about themselves and their countries frequently, but never realize that they are also expected to participate by asking questions themselves or expanding their responses. A question and answer session in which the native speaker asks all the questions and the foreign students answer them can be very boring. The result is that the conversation dies and is not resumed again. The skills needed for this kind of interaction have to be taught and the students should have the opportunity to practice them. This will certainly help them make and keep new friends.

The degree to which students are involved in the creation of the dialogues may vary. First, the teacher may want to provide the situation and the lines of one speaker, so that students can respond appropriately. Responses, of course, may vary, and students will realize then that there is no one correct answer. Second, the teacher may want to provide the situation and may ask students to work in groups to come up with a good dialogue. Students later may be asked to act it out in class without reading the lines. This way, students will concentrate on the content of the exchange rather than on the phrases used in writing the dialogue. Finally, the teacher can ask students to think of a situation based on their own experience and write the dialogue. Again, students may work in groups and in doing so will have the opportunity to interact with each other in English. Sometimes students take advantage of these opportunities to include anecdotes or tell of embarrassing situations they have experienced in using their new language. ESL teachers can explore with the students the reasons for such situations and include cultural insights in the discussion of those dialogues.

C. Problem solving activities - As the name suggests, students are expected to find a solution to a challenging and interesting problem. The problem can be solved in different ways, but justifying the choice is most important.

The exchange of ideas and the analysis of different solutions is encouraged to get the students involved in lively discussions.

A worksheet prepared by the instructor can serve as the framework to guide the students in finding an adequate solution to the problems given. This worksheet might include a brief statement of the problem and numerals from 1 to 6, depending on the level of the students, where they can record the arguments in favor or against each solution. The advantage of this procedure is that it helps focus the students' attention in the task at hand. Besides, it seems easier for the students to solve a problem when they know clearly the procedure to follow. George Rooks in The Non-Stop Discussion Workbook (1981) includes three steps: Read, Consider, Decide. In the first step the author introduces the problem to be discussed. In the second step, the author includes various facts and points of information that will be necessary for the students to consider while trying to solve the problem. Finally, the students have to evaluate the information provided and write their decisions.

Within this area of problem solving we can include different types of activities: reaching a consensus exploring options, and bridging information gaps.

1. Reaching a consensus - This activity works best when students are divided in small groups and each group has to come up with one solution to the problem. This means that students have to be persuasive in defending their viewpoint to the rest of the group. Even the shyest students have to participate, and everyone has to be prepared to present the solution to the class. In some cases, the group can decide who the speaker for the group will be.

   The topics for this kind of activity can be varied, and teachers should keep track of those that are most effective so that they can use them again with other groups. The first consensus to be reached, as was suggested before, is that of asking the students to narrow down a list of topics that will become the core for the conversation course. After additions and deletions to the list and active exchange of ideas, the students will repeat the same process later for the topics they selected.

   Hiring a new employee can become an interesting topic when there are several applicants with good qualifications but different backgrounds and working experience. Which one would work out the best for your particular needs as an employer?

Is gender a factor in the selection? Will the applicant's marital status affect the decision? Because of the different procedures for hiring people in different cultures, students will have to justify those procedures to the other students in the group, who do not necessarily share their viewpoint.

Other topics might include ranking items in terms of importance. For example, if there is a plane crash in the middle of nowhere and you survive the accident, what things would you carry with you, not knowing when you will be able to get to the nearest town. A list of items can be provided, and students will be asked to narrow it down considering each time how helpful each item might be. The more options available to solve the problems, the more lively the discussion will be. Questions about survival are very challenging. If only five people are to survive a nuclear disaster, which ones would you choose and why? There are five children who need a kidney transplant. There is only one available. Who should get it? A brief medical history of the patients will be provided indicating the length of time they have been waiting for the operation, their ages, their chances of survival, and some reference to their parents and siblings.

Real headlines in the newspapers can provide at times interesting topics of this sort. Filing them to use later in class can be very useful for ESL instructors. Plea bargaining cases, parole, etc. are new concepts for many students in whose countries the judicial system might be much more severe.

Giving advice to someone in trouble is another variation of this activity. Select a story from Ann Landers, preferably a story related to your students' age, interests, and needs, and have the class provide advice. Landers' advice will not be disclosed until each group has presented its advice to the class.

2. Exploring options - In this kind of activity, students are asked to select one of several options given and to justify its choice. This is an excellent opportunity to introduce cultural elements, both verbal and nonverbal. These options will become cultural units that will enlighten students as to behaviors expected, social formulas that could have been used, or appropriate choices in social encounters.

3. Bridging information gaps - The main purpose of this activity is the interaction among students to

share and obtain information which each has or is lacking. Taylor (1983) identifies this activity as the "jigsaw principle". Excellent materials for this task are maps, schedules, and menus where some of the information is missing. Students have to obtain the missing information to be able to make a good decision. Planning a trip can be such activity. Students have to determine which cities they can visit on a specific budget and time.

D. Community oriented tasks - While most activities mentioned before take place in the classroom, community oriented activities take the students outside the classroom to interact with native speakers of English. This is probably one of the most difficult tasks for students because they are uncertain as to how well they will communicate or how easily they can obtain the information they are set out to obtain.

Students should not be allowed to improvise when talking to people. The interviews or surveys should be prepared ahead of time, with the collaboration of teacher and classmates until the questionnaire addresses the points the students want to explore. Even the speech by which students will introduce themselves has to be prepared and rehearsed, and ways of dealing with rejection should be discussed so that students don't feel bad if people do not want to take the time to answer their questions. A checklist to write down the

information is necessary if the students are to be accurate in their reporting later on. Also, a specific number of people to be interviewed or contacted should be mentioned so that everybody puts in the right amount of work.

Basically, we are asking the students to venture into a new environment to obtain information. This information gathering process can be of three different types.

1. Contacting several native speakers - Surveys and opinion polls are the most frequently used. Students obtain information regarding special holidays, habits, preferences, or American customs and traditions. Patterns of activities can be discovered by getting people's schedules about work, meals, etc. Also, issues presented in the newspaper can be used to obtain people's reactions. Paulston and Bruder (1976) suggest using a selected topic from Ann Landers with the answer deleted. This way, students will be able to report to the class the advice given or the reaction obtained from Americans and compare it with the results given by Landers. The issues discussed in Ann Landers are themselves cultural capsules that make the students aware of special concerns Americans have. This will add interest to

the class discussions that will follow the different presentations students will make in class.

2. Interviewing one person - Both the students and the teacher should find interesting and well-known persons in the community that they would like to interview. The class can determine the criteria to be used in that selection. Should it be a person in a particular field of study? Should it be someone in sports? Should it be someone their own age? It is important at this point for the teacher to tap the resources of the community and the school to provide the students with good opportunities to interview native speakers of English.

3. Learning about different organizations - Students will go to a bank, to a company, to a university, to a car dealer, etc. and obtain information about how to open a savings or checking account, how to apply for a job, or how to go about buying a car. Besides meeting and talking to English speakers, students will be involved in obtaining "useful" information that everyone in class might want to have. As in the other two cases, students have to work ahead of time to determine the information that they need to obtain. Brief scripts and the use of skits and role playing can help the students become comfortable with the task at hand.

E. Role playing - This is probably one of the best activities for the development of fluency. The students adopt different personalities and relate to others in class by improvising responses and solving problems to which they had not been exposed before. It provides an excellent opportunity for the teacher to point out cultural aspects such as nonverbal communication. Paulston and Bruder (1968) discuss role playing at length and provide several examples where the degree of control for the role play varies. They point out that conflict is a necessary ingredient to create the need for talking. According to them, a role play consists of three aspects: the situation, the roles, and useful expressions. Background knowledge is mentioned as an occasional necessary element when students lack the necessary knowledge to carry out their assigned roles. The closer to reality, the better the role playing activity will be and it will force the students to make choices as to the degree of formality required in that situation. Although ignored sometimes, code switching is a necessary part of learning English and should be pointed out to the students. Saville-Troike (1980) indicates that "The ability to style-switch appropriately in different situations, and with different audiences, is a skill which should be recognized and consciously taught to the extent we can do so."

Variations of this activity have been made in order to increase the effectiveness of role playing. Robert J. Di Pietro (1982) developed an open-ended scenario in which new information is introduced that will force students to react appropriately to unexpected circumstances. "The preconditions spelled out for open-ended scenarios mirror those of actual discourses, leading students to respond to changes in speaker-intentions, just as they might do in real life situations." Moreover, this type of role playing will help students familiarize themselves with some of the characteristics of extended discourse such as false starts, turn taking, change of topic, etc. In his discussion of simulated activities and role playing, Long (1975) suggests that the materials be selected, not only according to the situation but also according to communicative functions which students are expected to learn.

Role play has also been looked upon as a tool to help students overcome cultural fatigue (Donahue and Parsons 1982). In fact, they state that, "Roleplay serves a double function as a technique to overcome cultural fatigue. First, it lends itself well to the development of the process of transcultural dialogue which is necessary if we are to establish an emphatic atmosphere. Second, it lends itself well to teaching the necessary rules of conversation once the appropriate atmosphere is established."

For the effective use of role play Donahue and Parsons identify a seven step procedure: warm up, selection of participants, audience preparation, the role play, discussion of the role play, re-enactment with new players, further discussion, and summary. Through these steps, students are able to learn from one another and not only become sensitive to cultural differences but also understand and accept them.

Role play offers variety and richness to the ESL classroom. Procedures change, as students get more or less freedom as to the role they are to play. Of course, the more detailed the description of the characters or roles, and situations, the more limited the students will be as to what they can or cannot say. Vaguely described characters can allow for surprises as students become familiar with the procedure involved in roleplay.

All of the activities presented here are intended to provide ESL teachers with a variety of techniques for the development of their students' speaking skills. It is important to reiterate that for a successful conversation class careful planning is necessary to keep the motivation high and to challenge the students. Group work is an excellent way to overcome problems of large classes and "shy" students and to provide more opportunities for the students to talk.

The activities are also geared to create the need for communication and to provide realistic situations which will force the students to take into account both variety and appropriateness of responses. Most importantly, these activities will make the students aware of the communication process at different levels: verbal and nonverbal.

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